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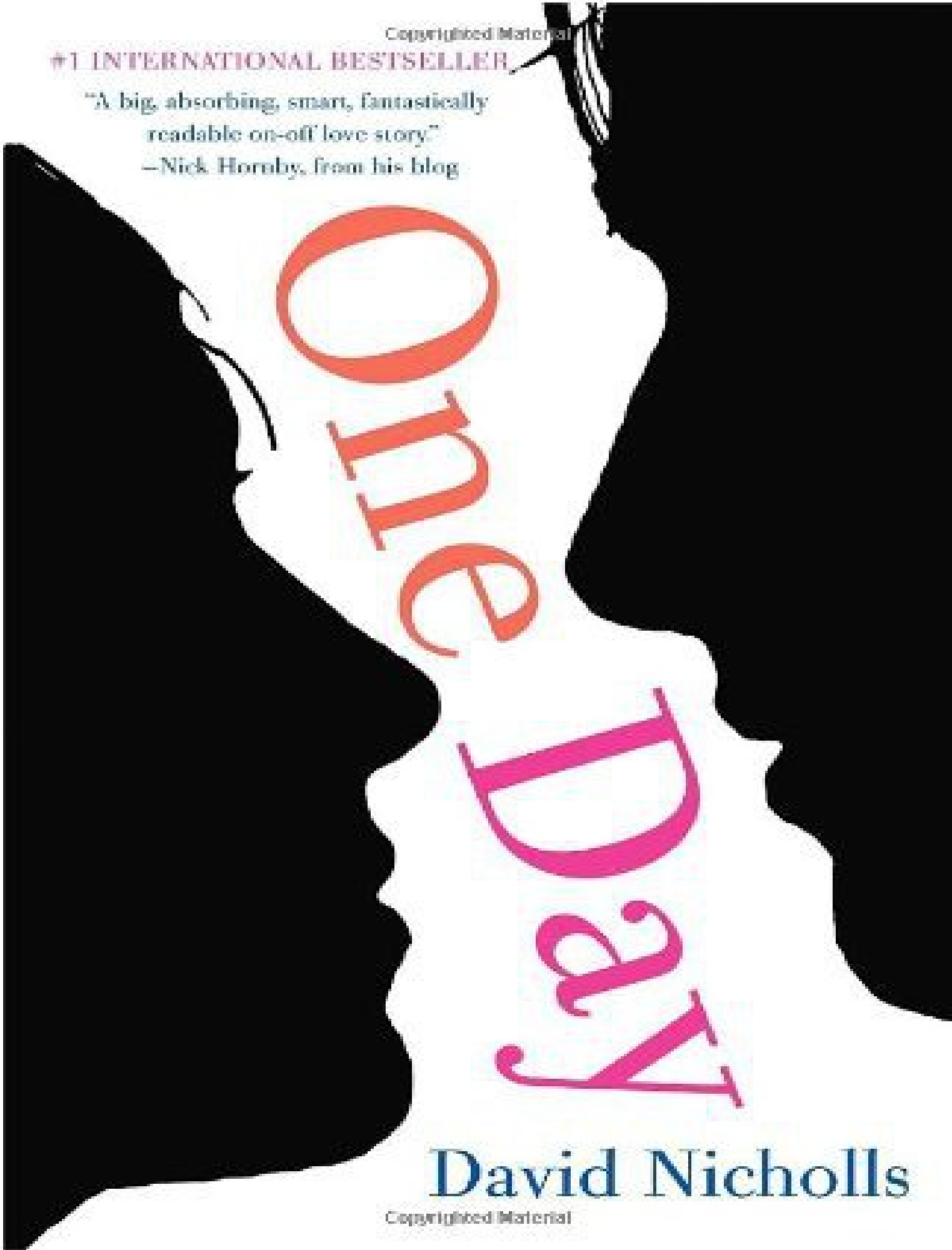

One Day

David Nicholls

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David Nicholls

ONE DAY

To Max and Romy, for when you're older.
And Hannah, as always.

Part One

1988–1992

Early Twenties

‘That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But, it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it and think how different its course would have been. Pause, you who read this, and think for a long moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on that memorable day.’

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

CHAPTER ONE. The Future

FRIDAY 15 JULY 1988

Rankeillor Street, Edinburgh

‘I suppose the important thing is to make some sort of difference,’ she said. ‘You know, actually change something.’

‘What, like “change the world”, you mean?’

‘Not the whole entire world. Just the little bit around you.’

They lay in silence for a moment, bodies curled around each other in the single bed, then both began to laugh in low, predawn voices. ‘Can’t believe I just said that,’ she groaned. ‘Sounds a bit corny, doesn’t it?’

‘A bit corny.’

‘I’m trying to be inspiring! I’m trying to lift your grubby soul for the great adventure that lies ahead of you.’ She turned to face him. ‘Not that you need it. I expect you’ve got your future nicely mapped out, ta very much. Probably got a little flow-chart somewhere or something.’

‘Hardly.’

‘So what’re you going to do then? What’s the great plan?’

‘Well, my parents are going to pick up my stuff, dump it at theirs, then I’ll spend a couple of days in their flat in London, see some friends. Then France—’

‘Very nice—’

‘Then China maybe, see what that’s all about, then maybe onto India, travel around there for a bit—’

‘*Travelling,*’ she sighed. ‘So predictable.’

‘What’s wrong with travelling?’

‘Avoiding reality more like.’

‘I think reality is over-rated,’ he said in the hope that this might come across as dark and charismatic.

She sniffed. ‘S’alright, I suppose, for those who can afford it. Why not just say “I’m going on holiday for two years”? It’s the same thing.’

‘Because travel broadens the mind,’ he said, rising onto one elbow and kissing her.

‘Oh I think you’re probably a bit too broad-minded as it is,’ she said, turning her face away, for the moment at least. They settled again on the pillow. ‘Anyway, I didn’t mean what are you doing next month, I meant the future-future, when you’re, I don’t know. .’ She paused, as if conjuring up some fantastical idea, like a fifth dimension. ‘. . *Forty* or something. What do you want to be when you’re forty?’

‘*Forty?*’ He too seemed to be struggling with the concept. ‘Don’t know. Am I allowed to say “rich”?’

‘Just so, so shallow.’

‘Alright then, “famous”.’ He began to nuzzle at her neck. ‘Bit morbid, this, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not morbid, it’s. . exciting.’

‘“Exciting!”’ He was imitating her voice now, her soft Yorkshire accent, trying to make her sound daft. She got this a lot, posh boys doing funny voices, as if there was something unusual and quaint about an accent, and not for

the first time she felt a reassuring shiver of dislike for him. She shrugged herself away until her back was pressed against the cool of the wall.

'Yes, exciting. We're meant to be excited, aren't we? All those possibilities. It's like the Vice-Chancellor said, "the doors of opportunity flung wide. ."'

'"Yours are the names in tomorrow's newspapers. ."'

'*Not* very likely.'

'So, what, are you excited then?'

'Me? God no, I'm crapping myself.'

'Me too. Christ. .' He turned suddenly and reached for the cigarettes on the floor by the side of the bed, as if to steady his nerves. 'Forty years old. Forty. Fucking hell.'

Smiling at his anxiety, she decided to make it worse. 'So what'll you be doing when you're forty?'

He lit his cigarette thoughtfully. 'Well the thing is, Em—'

'"Em"? Who's "Em"?'

'People call you Em. I've heard them.'

'Yeah, *friends* call me Em.'

'So can I call you Em?'

'Go on then, *Dex*.'

'So I've given this whole "growing old" thing some thought and I've come to the decision that I'd like to stay exactly as I am right now.'

Dexter Mayhew. She peered up at him through her fringe as he leant against the cheap buttoned vinyl headboard and even without her spectacles on it was clear why he might want to stay exactly this way. Eyes closed, the

cigarette glued languidly to his lower lip, the dawn light warming the side of his face through the red filter of the curtains, he had the knack of looking perpetually posed for a photograph. Emma Morley thought 'handsome' a silly, nineteenth-century word, but there really was no other word for it, except perhaps 'beautiful'. He had one of those faces where you were aware of the bones beneath the skin, as if even his bare skull would be attractive. A fine nose, slightly shiny with grease, and dark skin beneath the eyes that looked almost bruised, a badge of honour from all the smoking and late nights spent deliberately losing at strip poker with girls from Bedales. There was something feline about him: eyebrows fine, mouth pouty in a self-conscious way, lips a shade too dark and full, but dry and chapped now, and rouged with Bulgarian red wine. Gratifyingly his hair was terrible, short at the back and sides, but with an awful little quiff at the front. Whatever gel he used had worn off, and now the quiff looked pert and fluffy, like a silly little hat.

Still with his eyes closed, he exhaled smoke through his nose. Clearly he knew he was being looked at because he tucked one hand beneath his armpit, bunching up his pectorals and biceps. Where did the muscles come from? Certainly not sporting activity, unless you counted skinny-dipping and playing pool. Probably it was just the kind of good health that was passed down in the family, along with the stocks and shares and the good furniture. Handsome then, or beautiful even, with his paisley boxer shorts pulled down to his hip bones and somehow here in her single bed

in her tiny rented room at the end of four years of college. 'Handsome'! Who do you think you are, Jane Eyre? Grow up. Be sensible. Don't get carried away.

She plucked the cigarette from his mouth. 'I can imagine you at forty,' she said, a hint of malice in her voice. 'I can picture it right now.'

He smiled without opening his eyes. 'Go on then.'

'Alright—' She shuffled up the bed, the duvet tucked beneath her armpits. 'You're in this sports car with the roof down in Kensington or Chelsea or one of those places and the amazing thing about this car is it's silent, 'cause all the cars'll be silent in, I don't know, what — 2006?'

He scrunched his eyes to do the sum. '2004—'

'And this car is hovering six inches off the ground down the King's Road and you've got this little paunch tucked under the leather steering wheel like a little pillow and those backless gloves on, thinning hair and no chin. You're a big man in a small car with a tan like a basted turkey—'

'So shall we change the subject then?'

'And there's this woman next to you in sunglasses, your third, no, fourth wife, very beautiful, a model, no, an *ex*-model, twenty-three, you met her while she was draped on the bonnet of a car at a motor-show in Nice or something, and she's stunning and thick as shit—'

'Well that's nice. Any kids?'

'No kids, just three divorces, and it's a Friday in July and you're heading off to some house in the country and in the tiny boot of your hover car are tennis racquets and croquet mallets and a hamper full of fine wines and South

African grapes and poor little quails and asparagus and the wind's in your widow's peak and you're feeling very, very pleased with yourself and wife number three, four, whatever, smiles at you with about two hundred shiny white teeth and you smile back and try not to think about the fact that you have nothing, absolutely nothing, to say to each other.'

She came to an abrupt halt. You sound insane, she told herself. Do try not to sound insane. 'Course if it's any consolation we'll all be dead in a nuclear war long before then!' she said brightly, but still he was frowning at her.

'Maybe I should go then. If I'm so shallow and corrupt —'

'No, don't go,' she said, a little too quickly. 'It's four in the morning.'

He shuffled up the bed until his face was a few inches from hers. 'I don't know where you get this idea of me, you barely know me.'

'I know the type.'

'The type?'

'I've seen you, hanging round Modern Languages, braying at each other, throwing black-tie dinner parties—'

'I don't even own black-tie. And I certainly don't bray—'

'Yachting your way round the Med in the long hols, ra ra ra—'

'So if I'm so awful—' His hand was on her hip now.

'—which you are.'

'—then why are you sleeping with me?' His hand was on the warm soft flesh of her thigh.

‘Actually I don’t think I have slept with you, have I?’

‘Well that depends.’ He leant in and kissed her. ‘Define your terms.’ His hand was on the base of her spine, his leg slipping between hers.

‘By the way,’ she mumbled, her mouth pressed against his.

‘What?’ He felt her leg snake around his, pulling him closer.

‘You need to brush your teeth.’

‘I don’t mind if you don’t.’

‘S’really horrible,’ she laughed. ‘You taste of wine and fags.’

‘Well that’s alright then. So do you.’

Her head snapped away, breaking off the kiss. ‘Do I?’

‘I don’t mind. I like wine and fags.’

‘Won’t be a sec.’ She flung the duvet back, clambering over him.

‘Where are you going now?’ He placed his hand on her bare back.

‘Just the bog,’ she said, retrieving her spectacles from the pile of books by the bed: large, black NHS frames, standard issue.

‘The “bog”, the “bog”. . sorry I’m not familiar. .’

She stood, one arm across her chest, careful to keep her back to him. ‘Don’t go away,’ she said, padding out of the room, hooking two fingers into the elastic of her underpants to pull the material down at the top of her thighs. ‘And no playing with yourself while I’m gone.’

He exhaled through his nose and shuffled up the bed,

taking in the shabby rented room, knowing with absolute confidence that somewhere in amongst the art postcards and photocopied posters for angry plays there would be a photograph of Nelson Mandela, like some dreamy ideal boyfriend. In his last four years he had seen any number of bedrooms like this, dotted round the city like crime scenes, rooms where you were never more than six feet from a Nina Simone album, and though he'd rarely seen the same bedroom twice, it was all too familiar. The burnt out nightlights and desolate pot plants, the smell of washing powder on cheap, ill-fitting sheets. She had that arty girl's passion for photomontage too; flash-lit snaps of college friends and family jumbled in amongst the Chagalls and Vermeers and Kandinskys, the Che Guevaras and Woody Allens and Samuel Becketts. Nothing here was neutral, everything displayed an allegiance or a point of view. The room was a manifesto, and with a sigh Dexter recognised her as one of those girls who used 'bourgeois' as a term of abuse. He could understand why 'fascist' might have negative connotations, but he liked the word 'bourgeois' and all that it implied. Security, travel, nice food, good manners, ambition; what was he meant to be apologising for?

He watched the smoke curl from his mouth. Feeling for an ashtray, he found a book at the side of the bed. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, spine creased at the 'erotic' bits. The problem with these fiercely individualistic girls was that they were all exactly the same. Another book: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Silly bloody fool,

he thought, confident that it was not a mistake he would ever make.

At twenty-three, Dexter Mayhew's vision of his future was no clearer than Emma Morley's. He hoped to be successful, to make his parents proud and to sleep with more than one woman at the same time, but how to make these all compatible? He wanted to feature in magazine articles, and hoped one day for a retrospective of his work, without having any clear notion of what that work might be. He wanted to live life to the extreme, but without any mess or complications. He wanted to live life in such a way that if a photograph were taken at random, it would be a cool photograph. Things should look right. Fun; there should be a lot of fun and no more sadness than absolutely necessary.

It wasn't much of a plan, and already there had been mistakes. Tonight, for instance, was bound to have repercussions: tears and awkward phone-calls and accusations. He should probably get out of here as soon as possible, and he glanced at his discarded clothes in preparation for his escape. From the bathroom came the warning rattle and bang of an ancient toilet cistern, and he hurriedly replaced the book, finding beneath the bed a small yellow Colman's mustard tin that he flipped open to confirm that, yes, it did contain condoms, along with the small grey remains of a joint, like a mouse dropping. With the possibility of sex *and* drugs in a small yellow tin he felt hopeful again, and decided that he might stay a little longer

at least.

In the bathroom, Emma Morley wiped the crescents of toothpaste from the corner of her mouth and wondered if this was all a terrible mistake. Here she was, after four romantically barren years, finally, finally in bed with someone she really liked, had liked since she'd first seen him at a party in 1984, and in just a few hours he'd be gone. Forever probably. He was hardly likely to ask her to go to China with him, and besides she was boycotting China. And he was alright, wasn't he? Dexter Mayhew. In truth she suspected he wasn't all that bright, and a little too pleased with himself, but he was popular and funny and — no point fighting it — very handsome. So why was she being so stroppy and sarcastic? Why couldn't she just be self-confident and fun, like those scrubbed, bouncy girls he usually hung around with? She saw the dawn light at the tiny bathroom window. Sobriety. Scratching at her awful hair with her fingertips, she pulled a face, then yanked the chain of the ancient toilet cistern and headed back into the room.

From the bed, Dexter watched her appear in the doorway, wearing the gown and mortar board that they'd been obliged to hire for the graduation ceremony, her leg hooked mock-seductively around the doorframe, her rolled degree certificate in one hand. She peered over her spectacles and pulled the mortar board down low over one eye. 'What d'you think?'

'Suits you. I like the jaunty angle. Now take it off and come back to bed.'

'No way. Thirty quid this cost me. I'm going to get my

money's worth.' She swirled the gown like a vampire's cape. Dexter grabbed at a corner but she swiped at him with the rolled-up certificate before sitting on the edge of the bed, folding her spectacles and shrugging off her gown. He had one last glimpse of her naked back and the curve of her breast before they disappeared beneath a black t-shirt that demanded unilateral nuclear disarmament now. That's that, he thought. Nothing was less conducive to sexual desire than a long black political t-shirt, except perhaps that Tracy Chapman album.

Resigned, he picked her degree certificate off the floor, rolled the elastic band along the length of the scroll, and announced 'English and History, Joint Honours, 1st Class.'

'Read it and weep, two-two boy.' She grabbed for the scroll. 'Eh, careful with that.'

'Getting it framed, are you?'

'My mum and dad are having it turned into wallpaper.' She rolled it tightly, tapping the ends. 'Laminated place mats. My mum's having it tattooed across her back.'

'Where are your parents anyway?'

'Oh, they're just next door.'

He flinched. 'God, really?'

She laughed. 'Not really. They drove back to Leeds. Dad thinks hotels are for toffs.' The scroll was stashed beneath the bed. 'Now budge up,' she said, nudging him to the cool side of the mattress. He allowed her in, sliding one arm somewhat awkwardly beneath her shoulders, kissing her neck speculatively. She turned to look at him, her chin

tucked in.

'Dex?'

'Hm.'

'Let's just cuddle, shall we?'

'Of course. If you want,' he said gallantly, though in truth he had never really seen the point of cuddling. Cuddling was for great aunts and teddy bears. Cuddling gave him cramp. Best now to admit defeat and get home as soon as possible, but she was settling her head on his shoulder territorially, and they lay like this, rigid and self-conscious for some time before she said:

'Can't believe I used the word "cuddle". Bloody 'ell — *cuddle*. Sorry about that.'

He smiled. 'S'alright. Least it wasn't *snuggle*.'

'*Snuggle*'s pretty bad.'

'Or *smooch*.'

'*Smooch* is awful. Let's promise never, ever to *smooch*,' she said, regretting the remark at once. What, together? There seemed little chance of that. They lapsed into silence again. They had been talking, and kissing, for the last eight hours, and both had that deep, whole body fatigue that arrives at dawn. Blackbirds were singing in the overgrown back garden.

'I love that sound,' he mumbled into her hair. 'Blackbirds at dawn.'

'I hate it. Makes me think I've done something I'll regret.'

'That's why I love it,' he said, aiming once again for a

dark, charismatic effect. A moment, then he added, 'Why, have you?'

'What?'

'Done something you regret?'

'What, this you mean?' She squeezed his hand. 'Oh, I expect so. Don't know yet, do I? Ask me in the morning. Why, have you?'

He pressed his mouth against the top of her head. 'Course not,' he said, and thought *this must never, ever happen again.*

Pleased with his answer, she curled closer into him. 'We should get some sleep.'

'What for? Nothing tomorrow. No deadlines, no work. .'

'Just the whole of our lives, stretching ahead of us,' she said sleepily, taking in the wonderful warm, stale smell of him and at the same time feeling a ripple of anxiety pass across her shoulders at the thought of it: independent adult life. She didn't feel like an adult. She was in no way prepared. It was as if a fire alarm had gone off in the middle of the night and she was standing on the street with her clothes bundled up in her arms. If she wasn't learning, what was she doing? How would she fill the days? She had no idea.

The trick of it, she told herself, is to be courageous and bold and make a difference. Not change the world exactly, just the bit around you. Go out there with your double-first, your passion and your new Smith Corona electric typewriter and work hard at. . something. Change lives through art maybe. Write beautifully. Cherish your friends, stay true to

your principles, live passionately and fully and well. Experience new things. Love and be loved if at all possible. Eat sensibly. Stuff like that.

It wasn't much in the way of a guiding philosophy, and not one you could share, least of all with this man, but it was what she believed. And so far the first few hours of independent adult life had been alright. Perhaps in the morning, after tea and aspirin, she might even find the courage to ask him back to bed. They'd both be sober by then, which wouldn't make things any easier, but she might even enjoy it. The few times that she'd gone to bed with boys she had always ended up giggling or weeping and it might be nice to try for something in between. She wondered if there were condoms in the mustard tin. No reason why there shouldn't be, they were there last time she looked: February 1987, Vince, a hairy-backed Chemical Engineer who had blown his nose on her pillowcase. Happy days, happy days. .

It was starting to get bright outside. Dexter could see the pink of the new day seeping though the heavy winter curtains that came with the rented room. Careful not to wake her, he stretched his arm across, dropped the end of his cigarette into the mug of wine and stared up at the ceiling. Not much chance of sleep now. Instead he would pick out patterns in the grey Artex until she was completely asleep, then slip out and away without waking her.

Of course leaving now would mean that he would never see her again. He wondered if she would mind, and presumed she would: they usually did. But would he mind?

He had managed perfectly well without her for four years. Until last night he had been under the impression that she was called Anna, and yet at the party he hadn't been able to look away. Why had he not noticed her until now? He examined her face as she slept.

She was pretty, but seemed annoyed by the fact. Her bottled-red hair was almost wilfully badly cut, alone in front of the mirror probably, or by Tilly whatsername, that loud, large girl she shared this flat with. Her skin had a pallid puffiness that spoke of too much time in libraries or drinking pints in pubs, and her spectacles made her seem owlish and prim. Her chin was soft and a little plump, though perhaps that was just puppy-fat (or were 'plump' and 'puppy-fat' things you weren't meant to say now? in the same way that you couldn't tell her she had tremendous breasts, even if it was true, without her getting all offended).

Never mind that, back to her face. There was a slight greasy sheen on the tip of her small, neat nose and a spattering of tiny red spots on her forehead, but these aside there was no denying that her face — well, her face was a wonder. With her eyes closed he found that he couldn't recall their exact colour, only that they were large and bright and humorous, like the two creases in the corners of her wide mouth, deep parentheses that deepened when she smiled, which seemed to be often. Smooth, pink mottled cheeks, pillows of flesh that looked as if they would be warm to the touch. No lipstick but soft, raspberry-coloured lips that she kept tightly closed when she smiled as if she didn't want to show her teeth, which

were a little large for her mouth, the front tooth slightly chipped, all of this giving the impression that she was holding something back, laughter or a clever remark or a fantastic secret joke.

If he left now he would probably never see this face again, except perhaps at some terrible reunion in ten years' time. She'd be overweight and disappointed and would complain about him sneaking off without saying goodbye. Best to leave quietly, and no reunions. Move on, look to the future. Plenty more faces out there.

But as he made his decision, her mouth stretched open into a wide smile and without opening her eyes she said:

'So, what do you reckon, Dex?'

'About what, Em?'

'Me and you. Is it love, d'you think?' and she gave a low laugh, her lips tightly closed.

'Just go to sleep, will you?'

'Stop staring up my nose then.' She opened her eyes, blue and green, bright and shrewd. 'What's tomorrow?' she mumbled.

'Today you mean?'

'Today. This bright new day that awaits us.'

'It's a Saturday. Saturday all day. St Swithin's Day as a matter of fact.'

'What's that then?'

'Tradition. If it rains today it'll rain for the next forty days, or all summer, or something like that.'

She frowned. 'That doesn't make any sense.'

‘Not meant to. It’s a superstition.’

‘Raining where? It’s always raining somewhere.’

‘On St Swithin’s grave. He’s buried outside Winchester Cathedral.’

‘How come you know all this?’

‘I went to school there.’

‘Well la-di-da,’ she mumbled into the pillow.

‘“If on St Swithin it doth rain/Something dum-di-dum again.”’

‘That’s a beautiful poem.’

‘Well, I’m paraphrasing.’

She laughed once again, then raised her head sleepily. ‘But Dex?’

‘Em?’

‘If it doesn’t rain today?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘What are you doing later?’

Tell her that you’re busy.

‘Nothing much,’ he said.

‘So shall we do something then? Me and you, I mean?’

Wait ’til she’s asleep then sneak away.

‘Yeah. Alright,’ he said. ‘Let’s do something.’

She allowed her head to drop onto the pillow once more. ‘Brand new day,’ she murmured.

‘Brand new day.’